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ABSTRACT

"Best ideas" are chosen because they correspond with and confirm existing beliefs, are perceived as advantageous, are relatively uncomplicated, and can be experimented with. "Best ideas" for reading instruction would be chosen both by reading professionals at the university and by teachers in the classroom on the basis of which ideas correspond with their existing theoretical orientation to the reading process and their beliefs about the type of instruction that should be delivered. Best ideas come from a teacher's peers, school reading specialists, university classes, methods textbooks, inservice presentations, experts in the field, journals, professional meetings, and commercial reading materials. The best ideas in reading instruction (increasing background knowledge, using a wide variety of reading materials, encouraging permanent interest in reading, and integrating reading with other subject areas) have not really changed since the 1920s. What has changed is how best to achieve those aims. Educational research has brought diversification to the field of reading instruction and will lead to more and changing "best ideas" for reading instruction. (Forty references are attached.) (RS)

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BEST IDEAS: SOURCES AND INFLUENCES

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"BEST IDEAS": SOURCES AND INFLUENCES

Where do "best ideas" come from? How are they disseminated and applied? Are the "best ideas" research based or basically a product of conventional wisdom and strongly held beliefs? Have "best ideas" changed over time as knowledge has accrued about both pedagogy and reading?

The answers to these questions are neither simple nor straight forward. The choice of a set of "best ideas" is a value-laden decision. It is influenced by a wide range of social, cultural, educational, and economic factors. The dissemination of "best ideas" can be either helped or hampered by that same set of factors. Research can produce "best ideas" or it can produce "worst" ideas that are nevertheless implemented and valued. The purpose of this paper is to describe how "best ideas" become valued (or not valued), describe some of the sources of "best ideas", and to examine if best ideas have changed over the last century.

How are best ideas chosen?

In order for ideas to become valued, they must first become known. Clifford (1973) states that educational ideas and research are thrown into and filtered through the general marketplace of ideas. They become known and accepted by cultural diffusion, "an obscure, ambiguous, often involuntary transaction system whereby innovations and ideas are spread widely throughout some extended subsociety or the whole culture." (p. 25) If the research and ideas substantiate existing personal and group opinions, they are accepted. If, on the other hand, they contradict these opinions, they get neither notice nor

acceptance. Choosing and valuing an idea or practice, then, is dependent on the existing opinions of the receivers of the knowledge.

Other influences impact the acceptance of an idea as having use and value. Rogers (1983) lists four attributes which affect the adoption of an idea into a belief and value system. First, the ideas must be perceived as being relatively advantageous to the individual or organization. In other words, the ideas must be perceived as being better than any of the alternatives that are offered or already in use. If the idea is perceived as being much better than what is already being done or what is already believed, than it has more probability of becoming valued. If, however, it is perceived as being only as good or worse than what is already believed or valued, the idea will probably be discarded. The second attribute Rogers lists is the compatibility of the idea with existing values, past experiences, and present needs. The more compatible the idea is with existing values and beliefs, the higher the probability of acceptance of the idea as a "best" idea. The less compatible it is with existing opinion, the less probability it has of adoption. The third attribute necessary for adoption as a best idea is the complexity of the idea, or the degree to which the idea is relatively difficult or easy to understand and use. The easier the idea is to understand and implement, the higher the probability that the idea becomes used by many teachers. The more difficult the idea is to understand, the less probability it has of adoption as a best idea. The fourth attribute is the degree to which an idea may be observed or experimented with. If an idea can be easily implemented, even in a limited way, or even if its implementation or the result of its implementation can be observed, the potential user of the idea has

the opportunity to evaluate it before making a decision about its effectiveness or possible use.

Best ideas, then, are chosen because they correspond with and confirm existing beliefs, are perceived as advantageous, are relatively uncomplicated, and can be experimented with. Best ideas for reading instruction would be chosen, consequently, by both reading professionals at the university and teachers in the classroom on the basis of which ideas correspond with their existing theoretical orientation to the reading process and their beliefs about the type of instruction that should be delivered (Kinzer & Carrick, 1986). Harste and Burke (1977) defined the theoretical orientation of a reading teacher as the particular knowledge and belief system a teacher holds toward the reading process. This theoretical orientation would include whether the teacher believed reading was a bottom-up, top-down, or interactive process as well as whether reading instruction should be content-centered or child-centered (Rupley & Logan, 1985).

Reading as a bottom-up process accentuates the importance of the text. Reading is triggered by grapho-phonic information to derive meaning from print. Reading as a top-down process stresses the importance of the reader. Reading is triggered by prior knowledge and experience to derive meaning from print. Reading as an interactive process emphasizes the importance of both the reader and the text. The reader employs both prior knowledge and text information to derive meaning from text. Content-centered instruction concentrates on the substance of what is to be learned. In reading, the focus would be on linear skills--words,

word parts, literal comprehension/facts. Student-centered instruction is dependent on the interests of the child. The focus is on an integrated curriculum and the holistic nature of learning. Those professionals who believe reading is primarily a bottom-up process would tend to value ideas which emphasize the goals of word recognition and literal comprehension of the author's meaning. Text-based or content-centered instructional ideas focusing on mastery of skills would be valued more highly. Professionals who believe reading is primarily a top-down process would tend to value ideas which emphasize the construction of meaning using the reader's prior knowledge and resources. Instructional ideas which were reader-based and student-centered emphasizing the holistic nature of language would be valued more highly. Professionals who believe that reading is an interactive process would tend to value ideas which emphasize the interaction between the reader and the text that leads to the construction of meaning. Both text-based content-centered and reader-based student-centered instructional ideas emphasizing both comprehension of content and increasing reader resources would be highly valued.

An individual's theoretical orientation toward reading and reading instruction is not the only influence on the choice of best ideas. Another important influence is the context of the teaching situation (Barr & Duffy, 1978; Buike & Duffy, 1979; Duffy, 1981). The context of the teaching situation is the implicit and explicit social system of which the teacher is part and which mediates behavior. It includes the nature of the students in the classroom, the commercial reading program adopted by the school, the grade and ability level(s)

being taught, the community surrounding the school, and the experiences of the teacher. Therefore, the choice of best ideas that a particular teacher of reading chooses is balanced by the constraints placed on her by the community, school, and classroom in which she teaches. If the community and school advocate a bottom-up content-centered curriculum emphasizing the acquisition of basic skills, the best ideas chosen by an individual teacher will be more consistent with those demands than with a more student-centered top-down orientation, regardless of the beliefs of that teacher. If the administration of the school requires the teacher to use only the commercial reading program adopted by the school district, she will have to adapt her beliefs (especially if they do not match the assumptions of the textbook) to the constraints imposed on her. If the students in the classroom are perceived to be low ability, teachers will often focus on text-based content-centered instruction. On the other hand, if they are perceived as being of high ability, the instruction often becomes very reader-based and student-centered. Primary grade teachers have a tendency to focus on text-based instruction (word recognition skills) while intermediate grade teachers focus more on comprehension.

How do these theoretical orientations develop? Can they change? Stansell and Robeck (1979) studied the development of theoretical orientations among preservice teachers. Students in various phases of a teacher preparatory curriculum in a university were assessed throughout their preparation period using the Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (TORP). They found that theoretical orientations of the students developed as result of the classes they were required to take and could change as a result of the theoretical orientation

of the professors under whom they studied. The practicums, however, had little influence on the development or change of their orientation to the reading process. Moore (1981) concurred with those findings and added that the influence of formal training programs often did not carry over into practice. Reesag (1984) found, however, that advanced level courses in reading did influence what teachers did in the classroom.

Bean (1980) explored the degree to which a graduate course in reading would update teachers' existing beliefs and practices. The students in the graduate class completed a self-rating scale on their teaching of reading at the beginning of the course and again at the end. The course, a blend of psycholinguistic theory and practical teaching strategies, was found to be instrumental in updating teacher beliefs and practices.

A teacher's beliefs and theoretical orientation, then, are formed as a result of the early courses taken during preservice instruction as well as during professional courses taken after certification. They are not static, but can change if a teacher is given guidance and shown how to apply the beliefs to real teaching situations. Can working with actual children help in the development of beliefs about reading and reading instruction? There is little research evidence to answer either yes or no to that question.

What are some sources of best ideas?

Best ideas come from several different sources. One of the sources consulted most frequently are a teacher's peers and the reading specialist in the school (Logan and Erickson, 1979; Pearce, 1984; Robinson,H., 1980; Robinson, R., 1979; Ruddell and Sperling, 1988; Sawyer, 1976). The social learning theory of

Bandura (1977) states that people learn from others by social modeling, or observation of behavior. He believes that communication between individuals coupled with modeling can cause changes in behavior. Rogers (1983) believed, however, that using just interpersonal communication to communicate a best idea would slow the adoption of that idea into an organization.

Sawyer (1976) surveyed 200 primary grade teachers chosen at random from the membership of the International Reading Association to find out what they used as sources for ideas and assistance. At the top of the list were teachers in the same school. Logan and Erickson (1979) surveyed elementary teachers and found that a one-to-one conference with the reading specialist was one preferred way to get ideas to refine instruction. R. Robinson (1979) found that classroom teachers get ideas from local reading specialists who share new information and research findings aimed at solving common problems.

Another source of ideas are university classes, methods textbooks, inservice presentations, and "experts" in the field. Sawyer's survey (1976) found professional textbooks the second most frequently used source. Stansell and Robeck's study of preservice teachers (1979) showed that both the professor and the reading course influenced the choice of best ideas. Moore (1981) found that formal training programs and professional books influenced reading instruction, but that formal training programs had less influence than other sources. Logan and Erickson (1979) found that inservice presentations provided ways for teachers to refine instructional methods. The most preferred inservice workshops were training sessions with consultants on specific problem areas, classes or workshops for college credit, and presentations by reading specialists.

Bean (1980) found that graduate classes that were a blend of theory and practical teaching strategies were instrumental in changing teaching practices. Pearce (1984) found that busy teachers got their ideas from inservice workshops as well as coursework and the textbooks accompanying them. Even the "experts" are influenced by textbooks. A column in The Journal of Reading titled "Readings That Made a Difference" chronicled the influence of specific books on those reading professionals who are now considered experts. (see, for example, Robinson, 1980, and Harris, 1979).

A third source of best ideas are journal articles, professional meetings and research (Moore, 1981; Pearce, 1984; Ruddell and Sperling, 1988; Sawyer, 1976). Sawyer's (1976) survey found that the most preferred features of journal articles were activities for classroom use, enrichment activities, and suggestions of materials for classroom use. Ngandu (1978) analyzed the content of the International Reading Association National Conventions from 1962-1977. She found that the convention became more and more geared to the needs of practitioners. She stated "The convention is now a mecca for persons seeking practical teaching ideas and procedures." (p. 126) The most recent book of "best ideas", Becoming a Nation of Readers, (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson, 1985) is based on the most current scientific information about reading (research) and its significance to teaching and learning.

A fourth source of ideas is commercial reading materials used in the classroom (Moore, 1981). Why do they have an influence? Shannon (1982) stated that teachers rely on the ideas in commercial reading materials because they believe that the materials have scientific validity. Additionally, they feel

pressure from the school administration to use them. In other words, teachers feel pressured from outside, by both administration and the community, to use the ideas in the basal readers. They also feel constrained to use them because they are developed by "experts" on whom they depend for assistance (Barr and Duffy, 1978; Duffy, 1981).

How have "best ideas" changed over the last century?

Best ideas in reading, in fact in all of educational practice, over the last century have been influenced by a variety of economic, social, cultural, and educational factors. These factors include the increased time spent in school by children, the increasing flow of immigrants into the country, the increased need for literate workers, the diminishing and then resurgent influence of religion, and the changing concepts of child development. As the century grew older, more and more students began to stay in school until they graduated from high school. The beginning of the 20th century saw an increase in immigration to the United States, as did the periods after the World Wars, the Korean and Vietnam wars. As technology grew and developed, industry had and continues to have a greater need for literate workers. The schools did not initiate new practices because of these changes. In fact, "educational science in this century ...served more to legitimate already accepted practices than it has to initiate new ones." (Venezky, 1986, p. 151). The schools, then began to reflect the changing practices and beliefs about children as well as changes in society rather than initiating those changes.

Before the 1920's, the best ideas in reading instruction were the almost exclusive use of oral reading and of drill. The learning of decoding skills was

emphasized. Comprehension would come if word recognition was mastered. Reading drills were both group and individual. Reading methods texts of the period emphasized oral reading and synthetic phonics (Hoffman,A., 1983; Hoffman, J. and Segel, 1983).

During the 1920's emphasis shifted from oral reading to silent reading. Research began to make itself felt, although the influence of the research derived more from the opinions of the researcher than the quality or results of the research (Venezky, 1984). The followers of Herbart saw the elementary schools as the central agent in the development of the character of the child. They advocated the emphasis of silent reading and the use of literature and history as the topics for reading (Venezky, 1986). Thorndike's view of "reading is reasoning" combined with the Herbartian emphasis on meaning and content moved the view of reading to more than just word calling. Reading methods texts began to emphasize the "look-and-say" method of teaching beginning reading and the predominant use of silent reading. A dichotomy arose between those who felt reading should be taught as sequential skills and those who felt reading instruction should be based on the purposes of the child, between those who supported the use of the basal reader and those who supported the use of child-prepared materials based on the child's interests (Paris, Wixson, and Palincsar, 1986). The 24th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education was dedicated to the teaching of reading. Listed below are some of the ideas from that yearbook:

> Vigorous emphasis from the beginning on reading as a thought-getting process and the subordination of the mechanics of reading to thoughtful

interpretation.

A clear recognition of the vital contribution of wide experience to good interpretation, with special emphasis on pre-reading experiences and the temporary postponement, if necessary, of formal instruction in reading.

Provision for wide reading as an essential means of extending experience and of cultivating strong motives for, and permanent interests in, reading.

A significant increase in the amount and variety of reading materials and a corresponding improvement in their quality.

Definite provision for the systematic development and independent use of specific reading and study habits in all school subjects.

New types of organization and procedure in classes made necessary by the adoption of broader aims of reading.

The classroom use of informal tests as essential means of discovering group and individual needs. (Whipple, 1925, p.305-306)

During the 1930's the use of oral reading returned to the classroom (Hoffman,J. and Segel, 1983), although silent reading was still being emphasized. Reading methods textbooks began to emphasize the systematic teaching of reading skills using the controlled vocabulary of the basal readers (Hoffman, A., 1983). By the late 1930's, when the 36th Yearbook of the National society for the Study of Education appeared, habits, attitudes, and skills for reading to learn were at the forefront. Some best ideas from that yearbook include the following:

Instruction in reading should increase in breadth and efficiency.

To contribute more largely in the future ... to intelligent self-direction,... it is imperative that children and young people acquire greater independence and efficiency in reading. This implies greater accuracy in recognition and comprehension.

Opportunities should be provided for learners to work intelligently with books. ... (There is an) imperative need of abundant materials that can be read with ease and understanding by those at different levels of advancement.

Reading is conceived as a component part of a unified program rather than an isolated activity.

(Instruction should) insure initial right learnings, promote the sequential development of basic reading habits, increase efficiency in applying reading to study situations that are common to various curricular fields.

The materials used should be intriguing to those taught. Furthermore, they should be truthful, wholesome, and enlightening.

Instruction should be effectively adapted to the capacities, interests, and needs of pupils. (Gray, 1937, p. 17-20)

During the late 1940s and the 1950s, basal readers, the Directed Reading Activity, and round-robin oral reading became entrenched in the schools (Hoffman, J. and Segel, 1983). The skills approach was favored, especially the emphasis of phonics instruction. By the early 1960s, reading methods textbooks were expanding to include discussions of individualization, the language experience approach, programmed instruction, and linguistic readers. The NSSE

Yearbook for 1949 advocated the following best ideas for a good reading program:

> Is consciously directed toward specific,valid ends such as rich and varied experiences through reading, broadening interests, enjoyment through reading, and growth in fundamental reading abilities such as word recognition, comprehension of what is read, and organizing ideas from several sources.
>
> Provision of an adequate experiential background for daily reading.
>
> Provision of listening experiences related to reading activities.
>
> Recognition that the child's development in reading is closely associated with his development in other language arts.
>
> Extension of a well-worked-out larger reading program extending through all the elementary and secondary school grades.
>
> Provision of varied instruction and flexible requirements as a means of making adequate adjustments to the widely different reading needs of pupils.
>
> Pupils given definite instruction in reading as opposed to the provision of mere test exercises in reading. They are guided in reading a variety of materials. (Whipple, 1949, p. 34-38)

The NSSE Yearbook for 1961 advocated the following best ideas for reading teachers:

> A sound reading program is continuous, with each successive level building on the preceding one.
>
> Stress the interrelationships of learning to read and the role of reading

in personal and social development at successive levels.

Stress the sequential development of skills, abilities, and rewards of reading.

Make explicit the close relationship between reading and the other language arts. (Witty, 1961, p.12)

In 1985, Anderson et al. reviewed the research on reading for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement. The result was Becoming a Nation of Readers, which concluded with a list of recommendations, which could be classified as the best ideas for the 1980's. These best ideas include the following:

Parents should read to children and informally teach them about reading and writing.

Teachers should maintain classrooms that are both stimulating and disciplined.

Teachers of beginning reading should present well designed phonics instruction.

Reading primers should be interesting and comprehensible as well as give opportunities to apply phonics.

Teachers should devote more time to comprehension instruction.

Student should spend less time on work sheets and more time on independent reading and writing.

Schools should assess reading and writing more comprehensively.

Schools should have well stocked libraries. (Anderson et. al, 1985, p.117-122)

Have best ideas really changed over the last century? Not really. Those ideas valued in the 1920s (increasing background knowledge, use of a wide variety of reading materials, emphasis on reading for meaning, encouraging permanent interest in reading, integration of reading with the other subject areas) are still valued today. What has changed over the years is how best to achieve these valued aims. What, then, has the increased research in reading contributed toward the formulation of best ideas or changing values of reading teachers? According to Venezky (1986) "educational science [research] in this century has served more to legitimate already accepted practices that it has to initiate new ones." (p. 151) It has also, however, served to illuminate the many aspects of the reading process as well as highlight the different paths leading to the same goals. It has brought diversification to the field of reading. As Dewey said in 1929, "Command of the subject matter and the scientific method liberates the individual; it makes for diversification rather than set uniformity." (in Clifford, 1973, p.3) This diversification has led and will continue to lead to more and changing "best ideas" which will then lead to the goal of enhanced reading instruction and a more literate society.

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